

Stanford swimmer honors dad in own way

By Elliott Almond, Mercury News

Sara Giberson can't recall the final goodbye she said to her father. But she has little doubt he would have been front and center, cheering loudly at her biggest swim meets at Stanford this fall.

Jim Giberson, a New York City firefighter who didn't make it out of the World Trade Center, loved nothing more than watching his three daughters swim. The lifelong Staten Islander rarely missed a meet -- even if it meant skipping a softball game with his buddies at the firehouse.

Giberson plans to honor her father Sunday in a way she's sure he'd appreciate. Instead of joining somber eulogies to commemorate the 10th anniversary of 9/11, the sophomore will head to Santa Cruz for a weekend retreat to welcome Stanford's incoming freshman swimmers.

And Giberson's sister Kari, a Stanford senior who retired from swimming after high school, is camping and hiking in a remote part of Big Sur as part of a science research project.

"He wouldn't want us to stay home and cry," Sara said.

So, it's OK that for only the second time she won't visit Ladder Co. 35 on the Upper West Side of Manhattan to mark the anniversary of her father's death. Frankly, Susan Giberson is glad two of her daughters are away from New York.

"Sometimes I question still being here," she said. "It's a constant reminder. I'm hoping this 10th anniversary will make it a little easier for people."

What makes it easier for Sara Giberson is remembering how much her father loved being a firefighter. Even as a high school kid, Jim used to chase fire trucks in his car hoping to see some action.

The burly 6-foot-4 man had enjoyed his 20th anniversary on the job six days before the world changed forever.

When his 13-member crew got to the scene Jim didn't hesitate in leading comrades into the burning South Tower. Only one firefighter from that unit survived. In all, 343 firefighters succumbed.

Sara's last memory of Jim involves a "perfect" day at the park on her ninth birthday a week before unimaginable events stole his life.

She finds comfort knowing her father wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere other than ground zero that day. The kids grew up hearing stories of how terrible he felt about not being on duty when a truck bomb detonated underneath the World Trade Center in 1993.

"He wanted to take on everyone else's pain so they wouldn't have any," Sara said.

Giberson didn't feel much of anything when the planes crashed into the twin towers in Lower Manhattan 10 years ago. The fourth grader didn't know what was happening when school lessons suddenly were being interrupted and classmates whisked away. Sara had to stay on campus because both parents worked and there was no one to fetch her.

Those who remained were put in a room where they watched "Pippi Longstocking." Some kids spread rumors that a murderer had escaped prison.

Giberson learned about the attack when she finally arrived home. "Dad could be there," Kari told her.

Erika, 12, Kari, 11, and Sara went to sleep that night without knowing their father's whereabouts. Sara awoke in the middle of the night to the sound of her mother crying. Susan Giberson took her daughter onto her lap and told her that her father was missing.

"I just knew in my heart that my dad was no longer with me on earth," Sara said. "I just felt like a presence was watching over us, and it would be OK."

After that her memory fades. The girls didn't

Sara Giberson is shown at the Avery Aquatics Center in Palo Alto on Friday. (LiPo Ching / Mercury News)

attend school for more than two weeks. They stopped swimming. They went to funerals and memorials, and visited the firehouse or welcomed firefighters and others into their Staten Island home.

One month later the Gibersons prepared to observe what would have been Jim's 44th birthday. Susan Giberson told her daughters that the best present they could give their dad was to return to the pool.

"I truly believe swimming got my children through it," Susan said.

Erika went on to swim at Albright College in Reading, Pa., and Kari is a human biology major at Stanford planning to study medicine. Sara took it to another level by becoming New York's high school swimmer of the year in 2009, as well as a member of the U.S. junior national team.

She wanted to attend Stanford so much that she left her neighborhood club where she started at age 4 for a more prestigious pool in Manhattan. Sara and Susan arose at 4:20 a.m. to make the 5:30 morning practices. They commuted again after school.

The effort illustrated the 6-foot-1 Giberson's inner drive.

"She is a tenacious racer," Stanford coach Lea Maurer said. "She's going to lay it all out there. She will literally go until she collapses."

Giberson once dreamed about swimming in the 2012 Olympics, but now is focused on becoming a contributor for Stanford after finishing 14th in the 200-yard freestyle at the Pac-10 championships last season. She expects to focus on the 200 freestyle and 200 backstroke this season, which begins Sept. 30 against San Jose State.

Kari plans to attend as many meets as she can. Sara is her last thread to a sport that transports her to happy childhood memories. She's moved on from the sport and enjoys being a member of Stanford's a cappella singing group.

Sara also is considering studying human biology and following her sister into medicine.

But try as she might, the swimmer cannot escape the reminders of 9/11. Anything can trigger sad memories, such as the death of Osama bin Laden or another round of news involving the war in Afghanistan. It's a burden she sometimes has to bear with friends and the public.

"I don't want it to be the first thing people know about me," she said.

Better to recount all those treasured days together at the pool, especially the last time Jim saw his daughters swim. The Giberson girls and their friend Beth McComiskey set a meet record in a 12-and-under relay race at the Staten Island summer championships. The father had served as race timer, and then snapped a poolside victory photograph. Later that evening the family attended an end-of-the-season awards banquet.

One month later he would be gone.